

CARICOM's unity is under strain. We must remember our common values and interests

Any political union, almost by design, is under continuous strain. Joining together groups of people under diplomatic frameworks to fight for common interests is a constant work in progress which requires compromise and patience.

CARICOM, the group of 20 Caribbean states, has been a case study of a union that genuinely works. It is a remarkably successful project that has allowed us Caribbean states to punch above our weight on the international stage. For decades, despite our geographical and political differences, this family of nations has worked together with cohesion on matters of domestic, regional and foreign policy. Working by consensus has always been crucial to our success.

It is unfortunate, therefore, that on the occasion of the 31st Interessional Conference of Heads of Government in Barbados, we are divided on the two major foreign policy issues of 2020.

The issue is the deeply polarizing constitutional crisis in Venezuela, with some nations supporting Nicolas Maduro's claim to power, while others supporting Juan Guaido. For Haiti, our decision is rooted in a desire to see democracy and self-determination for the Venezuelan people, who have for too long been denied the right to select their leader. We have chosen to recognize Juan Guaido as the legitimate leader of Venezuela in line with the country's constitution.

What happens in Venezuela matters profoundly to all Caribbean nations – our futures are interconnected. It's right that we focus attention on the issue. CARICOM countries are united on principles of non-intervention and a commitment to a peaceful resolution to the ongoing political crisis of legitimacy- we cannot allow this issue to drive a wedge between us. It is our belief that all of CARICOM's member states will benefit from a peaceful, swift and democratic resolution which follows the will of the Venezuelan people.

Secondly, we are divided over the issue of the new leadership of the Organisation of American States (OAS), the elections for which are due to take place this May. The OAS plays a crucial role in developing ties between the Caribbean and the rest of the Americas, and in promoting democracy and stability across the region. In the past, CARICOM has been in broad agreement on the leadership of multilateral organizations and in rallying as one around the best candidate. However, this time we can't agree. Some CARICOM member states are supporting former Ecuadorean Minister of Defense María Fernanda Espinosa or Ambassador Hugo de Zela of Peru in a bid, as they see it, to reform the organization and make it more representative.

We in Haiti, by contrast, believe that the best person to lead those reforms is the current Secretary General, Luis Almagro of Uruguay. He is running for a second term, having ably led the OAS in facilitating dialogue and promoting democracy and human rights across the Americas. Although we agree that the OAS must adapt in some important ways, we believe he is in the best position to bring it forward, commanding broad support and carrying with him unparalleled experience.

Our strength in CARICOM has always been our unity. And with so much to do in and for the region, including building a single market, reducing or eliminating tariff barriers in our neighbourhood, and urgently increasing resilience to climate change, we should focus on the actions, approaches and people that will propel us forward. Our delegation to the summit, representing the biggest population in CARICOM, is seeking to forge unity and to build consensus on both these matters. We must use this opportunity redouble our commitment to one another and remember what we are here to do.

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